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What Day Care Ought to Be

by Patricia Gerald Bourne

We have been told why we need day care: the welfare rolls must be reduced and day care will allow able-bodied mothers to work; women must be enabled to realize their potential through roles and activities other than full-time care of their children; people no longer want to raise their children in the isolation of the nuclear family - relief is needed for and from the parents; employers of an increasingly female labor force hope that day care may remedy allegedly high rates of lateness and absenteeism due to undependable babysitting arrangements. All these have to do with the need for *care* for children while their parents are at work or otherwise occupied. A final powerful

argument is made by psychologists and educators who appreciate the critical importance of early pre-school years in a child's intellectual and emotional development. Their primary focus is on the needs of children rather than the needs of adults.

There is, of course, no reason why the needs of adults and the needs of children cannot be complementary - no reason, that is, until the question of our individual and national willingness to pay is faced.

When we talk about day care we are usually talking about three things. One is full-day care and protection of children whose parents are at work or are incapable of caring for them full time. The second is nursery



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schools, an enriching experience supplementing family life for the child. These programs have traditionally been half-day or three mornings a week, which means that they are not an option for the children of working mothers. The third, so new and so fragile that it is not yet clear that we can call it a tradition, is that of compensatory education.

Because "day care" has historically served children whose parents worked, it has been considered as something for people who are either too poor or too crass to stay home with their children. As the combination of work and motherhood has spread from the relatively small ranks of the very poor, who had no choice, to the professionals, who chose to work for reasons of self-fulfillment, the stigma associated with being a working mother has diminished. But the stigma associated with allowing someone else to raise your children for you has not diminished at all. The American commitment to the family as the sacrosanct child-rearing agent totally responsible for the emotional and moral development of its children is strong. If one relinquishes one's children to someone else, it is only to ensure that they are safe and physically taken care of. Day care serves this ethos well - it is quite plain about being a custodial, babysitting operation and makes no pretense at "rearing" children. Even when the well-to-do have gone out to work, they have hired housekeepers, babysitters or purchased group babysitting care.

Anyone who may have thought that this particular American attitude is anachronistic needs only refer to the President's December 1971 message vetoing a comprehensive child care bill: the President objected to committing "the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child-rearing over against the family-centered approach." He went on to say that "we cannot and will not ignore the challenge to do more for America's children in their all-important early years. But our response to this challenge must... cement the family in its rightful position as the keystone of our civilization. Good public policy requires that we enhance rather than diminish both parental authority and parental involvement with children."

But for the same reasons that day care is acceptable to the American family ethos, it is also gaining in some quarters a new kind of stigma. Because day care is hands-off regarding child-rearing, it also lacks the qualities of nurturing, developing or educating young children.

Day care has been, and still is, primarily the bailiwick of the social welfare profession. Licensing of

private day nurseries is generally done by departments of social welfare (though this varies from state to state); family day care homes are "caseloads" and the most significant federal support for day care comes from social security legislation administered by welfare departments. Virtually all federal support for day care has been explicitly for, and limited to, welfare or near-welfare children.

The backbone of the official day care services system is the licensed family day-care home. (The backbone of the "real" day care system is, by the way, the unlicensed family day care home and the babysitter - often grandmother or sister-in-law.) Care for 50 percent or more of the children whose parents work is by unofficial (*i.e.*, unlicensed) arrangements.

A family day care home is simply a situation where a woman (usually a mother) cares for a few children in her own home. Licensing procedures generally set limits on the number of children she may accommodate and set standards for the physical condition and characteristics of the house in hopes of ensuring the health and safety of the children. Licensing is theoretically contingent upon an acceptable rating by the social worker of the woman's emotional and intellectual suitability for the task of nurturing and caring for young children.

Family day care homes vary widely in type and quality of care provided. Many writers' favorite day care horror story is of a day care home with children tied to beds. Less frequently recounted are the instances of first-rate mini-nursery schools in an atmosphere of affection and freshly baked cookies. Day care homes often care for children during hours that no group program would contemplate - the split shift is a reality with which it is difficult for group programs to come to terms.

Private day nurseries, run for profit, and licensed (or not), are also a long-standing day care tradition. As with day care homes, licensing standards have related primarily to the adequacy of physical facilities and some minimum staff-child ratio of 1- to-10 or -12. The service provided is basically babysitting, whether you are poor and receiving care courtesy of the welfare department, or whether you are paying yourself.

Federal involvement in day care began during the Depression as part of WPA. But the first significant full-day group care program was created by the Lanham Act in 1941 to provide care for the children of mothers who were desperately needed in the war economy. This program was implemented with astonishing speed (and mixed results) and dismantled just as quickly when the war ended. Continuation of these programs was contingent upon state willingness to assume responsibility - California was the one state to do so and its Children's Centers programs, operated by school districts and paid for by state funds and sliding-scale parent fees, now make it unique in

extent and quality of day care services.

The primary source of federal support for day care has been Title 4A of the Social Security Act, as amended, in 1967. Under the AFDC Section, state welfare departments are enabled to provide day care benefits to every AFDC family and to those judged as past and potential recipients. These funds are disbursed on a three-to-one local matching-share basis; thus their use is contingent upon the willingness of state, county, city or some private source to provide one-quarter of the costs. Welfare agencies may use these funds to pay present providers (e.g., licensed family day care homes and day nurseries) or may contract with a private non-profit group to provide new services.

The second piece of Title 4A is the Work Incentive Program (WIN); it allows payment, again on a three-to-one matching basis, for day care services when the mother is enrolled in a WIN training program. This program makes no provision for expansion of services, it just pays for what is already there if you are lucky enough to find it. As soon as the mother has finished her training, WIN day care support ceases.

Title 4B of the Social Security Act, as amended, 1967, provides something called child welfare services. Grants are made to state welfare departments to provide services to children regardless of financial status. This program expended only \$1.5 million in 1970 (as contrasted to \$94 million under Title 4A, AFDC), and even some knowledgeable welfare department day care specialists have not heard of it.

The Economic Opportunity Act (1964) provides money for day care through two programs: the Concentrated Employment program, which authorizes day care funds in conjunction with manpower training programs administered by local community action agencies, and the Migrant Children program.

In addition, a wide variety of federal legislation includes a day care clause — that is, funds *may* be used for day care services, for planning, for facilities, for staff training and so on. Usually funds, which *may* be used for day care, are used instead in one of the many other allowable ways, but some programs such as Model Cities have begun to make a substantial contribution to new day care services. Because federal funding operates on a kind of "find me if you can" philosophy, the ferreting out of these many hidden sources of support has been limited to those few communities and groups who are highly skilled in the ways of grantsmanship.

In looking back over this brief review of federal participation in the support of day care services, three points stand out: 1) the federal government has gone to some pains to stay out of the business of *providing* day care services; they will *pay for services* that are provided by a local public agency or a nonprofit group. Funds are circuitously routed via state and county agencies (and are contingent upon their com-

mitment to pay a share) to make sure that there is no such thing as what Governor Reagan has called "federal kindergartens." 2) Funding is, with the one exception of an almost invisible program, explicitly for and limited to the welfare or near-welfare population. 3) Funds for day care for the poor are almost always contingent upon participation in the labor force or some training program in preparation for participation in the labor force. Federal participation in day care has been explicitly and almost solely linked to programs designed to limit the welfare rolls.

There is one irony in this chronicle of federal participation: in order for any provider of services to receive federal funds, he must meet what are called the Federal Interagency Guidelines. The irony is that the bureaucrats assigned the task of setting these standards came up with a requirement of a staff/child ratio of one-to-five (as opposed to the 1-to-10 or -12 usual in state-licensed custodial programs), and they require an educational, nutritional and parent-participation component among others. Programs that meet the government's own standards, then, cross dangerously over the line into child-rearing as defined by President Nixon. And, as we shall see, programs that meet the government's standards are costly.

The nursery school movement has stressed the importance of the early years, not so much as a time for learning (learning to read before the first grade was seen as an evil that inhibited the child's proper experience of childhood), but as a time for critical emotional development. Children needed to learn to play with their peers, to cooperate, to tolerate those restrictions on their freedom arising from their membership in a community. They needed to learn to relate to adults other than their parents, to be provided with alternative role models and to be provided with a variety of experiences essential to emotional and cognitive development. Nursery schools were not about education; they were about child development.

Public support for nursery schools has been only through state university programs where the nursery school is operated as a laboratory for teacher training. Fees in these schools are usually far below actual cost and sometimes an effort is made to grant scholarships in order to obtain a socioeconomic mix. But by and large the values associated with nursery school have been held by, and been limited to, the middle class.

Only recently have the education and learning theorists captured the middle-class imagination. Again, ability to pay limits such experiences to middle- and upper-class children. There is an irony to these expensive preschool learning centers — they developed in emulation (albeit grossly misinterpreted emulation) of a public program for the poor.

In 1964, as part of the War on Poverty, a bright-eyed hope-filled new program was begun called Head Start. Putting down Head Start as misguided boondoggle is now chic with both the right and the left.

Its payoffs in terms of its stated goals have certainly not been proven - nor disproven. But the influence of Head Start is undeniable. A program of compensatory education for "culturally disadvantaged" children, it was part and parcel of an attempt at basic social reform. Head Start was premised on success in the educational system as the key to social mobility of the poor and was seen by its creators as one essential piece of a many-faceted strategy to break the locked-in class structure of American society.

Interestingly enough, its creators and early administrators were rarely educators, but rather psychologists, psychiatrists and physicians. Like the nursery school movement, the thrust of Head Start was child development. The key to achievement in school was not seen to be so much a matter of giving children a literal "head start" in learning to read, but rather a catching up on what middle-class children had learned at home. The middle-class child's advantage was seen as being a matter of the "coping" skills he had acquired.

Originally comprising summer programs, then full-year, half-day and now often full-year, full-day programs, Head Start was endowed with the best the academic research establishment in a hopeful era could muster. But the latest in learning theories, in motor and cognitive skill development techniques, in educational games and toys were just part of the picture. A staff-child ratio of at least one-to-five was essential. The children were to be given nourishing meals, dental care, eye checks, screenings for early detection of physical or psychological handicaps. A salient part of the program was the involvement of parents - both in setting policy for their community's center and in the classroom. This effort to pull the community and home environment into a reciprocal link with the "school" was deemed essential, but its implementation was also largely uncharted waters and was thus one of the most vulnerable components of the program. (Another OEO program confronts this issue even more directly. Parent Child Centers serve children from before birth to about age three. Mothers are expected to be with their children most of the time and are given instruction in child-rearing while caring for their children.)

Head Start, with its high visibility, high costs and high pretensions, has inevitably come in for criticism from every direction. Money-savers met the Westinghouse evaluation study (which showed, by their criteria, the "head start" fading out by the second or third grade) with glee. Liberals met the same findings with despondency. It is not uncommon for Americans to substitute educational reform for basic social reform and then to castigate the schools for having been unable to reform the nation's social class structure.

The groups for whom Head Start was created have also criticized it, though for the most part continuing to participate and take pride in it. Their complaint that Head Start's "compensatory" ideology, based on a

theory of "cultural deprivation," was patronizing, unfair and counter-productive has largely been accepted by even those who designed the program. Their plea that Head Start must be run by those participating is an increasing imperative. Concerns about participation have centered around Head Start much more than around the custodial day care services to which the poor have usually been treated. Like it or not, Head Start has guts - highly controversial programs usually do. Head Start's guts lie in the degree to which it may supplant parental child-rearing responsibility. The recipients are right to be vehemently concerned that they maintain effective control of such a program. Their response, as opposed to President Nixon's, is not to avoid the problem with custodial care, but rather to struggle for ways of shaping and controlling high-quality educational and developmental programs so that they conform to their own child-rearing values.

We have seen that day care really means: 1) *care and protection of children while their parents work*. This tradition of day care has steadfastly avoided anything which will appear to be a usurpation of the family's child-rearing role. 2) *Nursery school in full-day form*. Here child-rearing functions are also carefully not usurped. It is a complement to and extension of the family environment. Nursery schools are often of the cooperative genre with the mother participating at least one morning a week and perhaps even taking classes in child development. 3) *Compensatory education*. Here we are not raising the child for the parents, but making up for what is seen as inadequate parental child-rearing. Some effort as in Head Start and especially in Parent Child Centers is made to educate the parents in the ways of child-rearing.

There are a number of programs around the country which effectively combine care and protection, child development and education. Though often growing out of the compensatory education tradition, these programs do not think of themselves as appropriate only to the poor, but rather to early childhood education for all children. The education profession has taken charge of this new definition of child care, but the education profession is no more acceptable a purveyor of day-care services to many groups than is the welfare profession. Child development skills are hardly one of the fortés of our school system, and our schools have been notoriously disconnected from and unre-

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sponsive to the child's family environment.

When one reads over what has been written about day care since it became a popular topic, one begins to get some feel that we are coming to a rough consensus about what day care ought to be. It should of course care for and protect our children; it should connect the child's worlds of home and day care; it should provide an environment that fosters his development of a sense of self, self-worth and security, and his ability to get what he wants and needs from the environment around him; and one which stimulates and develops his cognitive and sensory abilities. But when we take a closer look, we are not at all close to an agreement on what day care ought to be. The disagreement is wide on what kind of child care we want and on how much we are willing to spend for it.

States-righters on the right and decentralists on the left don't want the federal government to take charge of day care because that would destroy local autonomy. John Birchers on the right and radicals on the left don't want the public sector at any level to have anything to do with it because it would be an usurpation of individual freedom. Some groups on the right want the state to take over child-rearing functions for the poor in order to create a well-behaved lower class; some groups on the left think it is the state's responsibility to provide free child-rearing institutions for everyone who wants them.

Some minority groups want a way into the system and say the state must provide institutions that will facilitate this; others don't want any middle-class establishment inculcating values into their kids. Some want their young children to play and explore freely in their preschool years; others want their children to sit up straight and learn to read early.

The diversity of views could be spun out almost indefinitely. There is only one common denominator: care for the children of working mothers. Beyond that there is no possibility of agreeing on a definition. The common denominator is the lowest common denominator. The coalition that has formed around day care is really a coalition based on the needs of women in the labor force, not a coalition based on the needs of young children.

The second point on which there is a seeming consensus but, in fact, a wide disagreement, is on the amount of money we are willing to invest in care for children. Let us take a very rough look at day care costs, with school systems as a reference point.

An extravagant school district like Berkeley, California, spends about \$1400 per year per child. The national average is more like \$800. The cheapest custodial day care in California costs \$1200 per year per child. As with schools, the costs are in the teachers. The \$1200 day nursery figure pays for a program which employs an adult (usually an untrained one) for every 10 or 12 children. Federal Interagency Guidelines, mentioned earlier, require one adult for every

five children; all instructors must have academic degrees. Israeli programs operate on a one-to-four ratio. An OEO funded study of "exemplary" day care programs and systems around the country shows that those which maintain a one-to-five adult/child contact-hour ratio and which have first-rate educational developmental, health and parent involvement components are costing between \$2500 and \$3500 per year per child.

The major emphasis of federal legislation and administration proposals as of this writing is on enabling welfare women to work—or to make sure they have no excuses not to. An AFDC grant in San Francisco for a woman with two children (not including food stamps and medical coverage) is about \$2400 per year. The cheapest child care for her two children would be \$1200 each. Perhaps the administration hopes to be able to benefit the poor by paying for excellent child care rather than welfare support on the theory that the public will more willingly pay for quality child care than they will for feckless women. Perhaps. Or perhaps there are ways of cutting the costs of child care. There are. Schools have an adult-child contact-hour ratio of one-to-30 or -40. The middle class would, of course, not stand for such a thing. But they could and would pay if they were confronted with such an alternative.

The most striking thing to emerge from a cursory look at child care costs is the importance which staff/child ratios make. It is difficult to imagine how one adult can even "care-for and protect" more than five children at once, especially five children between the ages, of, say, two and four—unless, of course, we were able to deal with them as we now do with older children in schools. Ask any mother! We might well define "quality" in these terms as a minimum for all styles of day care—custodial, nursery or educational—but we will find that the costs of even custodial care are then up around \$2500 per year per child. Now let us look again at the groups that have formed a coalition of sorts around day care and ask whether they would be willing to pay at such a rate.

Will those in favor of getting welfare women out to work be willing to pay \$5000 for care for a woman's two children in order to save \$2400 on her AFDC grant? Will a woman whose earning power is \$6000-8000 be willing to spend \$5000 of it for child care in the private market? If she isn't, can the franchisers now entering the business with enthusiasm make a profit? Will industry and labor unions be willing to provide that magnitude of fringe benefit?

The common denominator in the case of costs, then, will very likely again be the lowest common denominator. But there are two choices that fall within an acceptable price range: one is the present low-cost, low-quality custodial system mixed with a few low-profile, high-quality programs like full-day Head

Start, like some of the California Children's Centers or some Title 4A programs; the other alternative is an extension of kindergarten, in its present format, to include children from 6 months to 5 years old.

It would seem that if we are to have quality day care services in the public or private sector - quality even in the most limited sense of a reasonably adequate adult/child ratio - we will have to be willing to assume at least a portion of its costs for all who use it, as yet another public responsibility. I am not optimistic about the possibilities of our doing this, simply because of our long-term national unwillingness to make meaningful investments in future generations. If we are even to find a basis of agreement upon which to do so it seems to me that we must find ways of giving that support in such a way that communities and groups may shape their own services in consonance with their own values and goals for their children. Those groups who argue most fervently that the nuclear family is an anachronistic child-rearing institution would be appalled and outraged if their children were subjected to child-rearing practices that shaped them into compulsively achieving, productive, fiercely competitive adults.

Since we as a nation disapprove of relinquishing responsibility for child-rearing to professionals - if not "disapprove" in some ideological sense, then at least are skeptical and mistrustful of the ability of anybody else to do it as we would like - then perhaps the only kind of child care system that can come into being is one that parents can trust and influence to raise their children as they would like. And if the development of a system which provides real choices and a real diversity of styles of care to the parents of young children is to come about, then we may have to be willing to think of the rearing of children as a task with real economic value and thus be willing to pay a woman or a man \$7000 a year to stay home and care for their two preschool children. And if men were mothers - or at least agreed to take a full share in the responsibility for rearing children - my guess is that this country would come to care in a meaningful sense for its future generations much more quickly and happily.

In the long run, then, given some critical value shifts, and given the invention of new mechanisms for disbursing public funds in such a way that effective client control can be combined with some acceptable modicum of public accountability, I can envision the possibilities of a network of quality child care services that would be acceptable.

In the short run, however, I am pessimistic. I feel that neither the public sector nor the private individual is, at this point, willing to spend sums on the order of \$2500 to \$3500 per year per child during the working day - willing, that is, if the issue is drawn solely around the needs of children. I would argue that

day care must be placed in the larger context of national priorities in pragmatic American style. We have seen that lawmakers have been willing to pay for child care if it is a means to a valued end, such as getting women off the welfare rolls and into the labor force. Perhaps we must, for the time being, accept these kinds of national priorities and play on them.

One of the current critical deterrents to the expansion of services, for instance, is the unavailability of construction and start-up funds. If we were to create an FHA-style, long-term guaranteed mortgage arrangement, we would provide large-scale capital to day care at very low actual cost to the government and with high appeal to the nation's bankers. We might also embellish on the tax credit and deduction theme. Employers who hire people from the welfare rolls, for instance, might be given tax credits if they pay for day care services for the children of those workers. A day care program might be granted credits on their building mortgages when they take welfare or near-welfare children. And allowed personal income tax deductions for working parents could be extended - most critically to benefit the lower middle class.

Welfare and near-welfare women could be employed as operators of family day care homes if some funds could be found for rehabilitating and equipping their homes and for training and supportive services. Another avenue is the exploitation of adult education funds linking instruction in "child development" with the operation of nursery or day care.

Perhaps most promising would be a linking of national concern over wage stability with day care. When the Scandinavians were faced with the problem of limiting wages in order to maintain a competitive position in the world economy, they substituted social benefits, which generate activity in the economy without inflationary stress, for wage increases. Free or subsidized child care services seen as substitution for wage increases might be politically acceptable.

We might also spend less of our energy pressuring the legislative branch for new appropriations, and more on finding effective mechanisms at the local level for ferreting out and combining existing federal, state and private funds. Techniques for watchdogging the bureaucracies that administer existing funds are also crucially needed; too often their reluctance to produce implementing regulations and their propensity to alter the intent of legislation by the way in which they write these regulations, block, tie-up and limit the use of funds authorized by the legislative branch at all levels of government.

This strategy of piecemeal picking and poking at the present system may strike those who have hoped for a bold and straightforward initiative as incredibly depressing. I would argue simply that a politically acceptable bold initiative at this point in history would have to take such a form that it would be a genuine disservice to the nation's children.

